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CHRIS GRIFFITH

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Airports adopt high tech parking system

CHRIS GRIFFITH The Australian September 28, 2011 5:32AM



This is one of hundreds of small computer systems that help guide parkers to a free spot. Source: The Australian

OVERHEAD camera guidance systems that help parkers pinpoint an empty spot are being rolled out at Brisbane and Canberra airports.

Park Assist co chief executive Richard Joffe said its system was being installed at a new short-term car park at Brisbane's domestic airport, an existing long-term car park there, and at two car parks at Canberra airport

The parking guidance system is the brainchild of two young entrepreneurs and consists of hundreds of overhead cameras.

Each camera is attached to a small 400 megahertz computer, and focuses on one to four car spaces. The small computers feed information to a central computer that maintains tally boards that display the number of free spaces on each car park level.

In addition to tally boards, red and green overhead lights guide parkers to free spots.



Mr Joffe said he and business partner Daniel Cohen met in 2005 in Sydney when he was working at McKinsey Consulting and Cohen at Goldman Sachs.



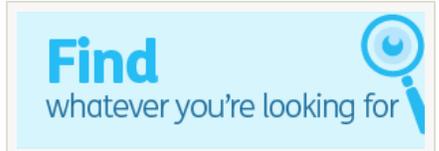
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Each was interested in starting a business and their idea was to automate parking.

Their first installation was at Westfield Chatswood on Sydney's north shore in 2005. Back then, the set-up was simpler and Park Assist used ultrasonic sensors rather than cameras for its guidance system. The Queen Victoria Building followed with a similar system.

With Mr Joffe and Mr Cohen both in just their mid 20s, it took courage and some front to convince the likes of Westfield to shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"The important ingredient is perseverance. Westfield is one of the most commercially savvy companies I have met," Mr Joffe said.

The first Australian site with camera guidance was Westfield at Bondi Junction. Last year Westfield adopted Park Assist, which also includes a facility for shoppers to locate their vehicle via computers in the centre.

Westfield itself then developed an iPhone app that leverages data from Park Assist, displays a photo of shoppers' cars, and guides them from the shopping plaza back to it.

Mr Joffe said Park Assist too had developed a "Find Your Car" app for Apple and Android devices.

The Westfield "Find My Car" feature came a cropper recently when blogger and software architect Troy Hunt discovered that URLs containing the number plates of all cars at Westfield's Bondi Junction in Sydney's east were publicly accessible to all - no hacking was required.

Sydney-based Hunt was able to develop software that could tell him the details of any car that arrived and left the shopping centre, and exactly where it was parked.

Mr Joffe said the security glitch was fixed "within 20 minutes", although, to date, Westfield has not reinstated the feature.

"Westfield is currently testing the 'Find My Car' functionality and will reinstate this service only when it's satisfied that it meets a premium standard," a spokeswoman said.

The Bondi Junction glitch has not quelled the resolve of Joffe and Cohen to continue to roll out their systems.

Mr Joffe said that in Australia, 11 Park Assist installations were in place, and another five were under construction. This year alone, the company is rolling out 17 camera sites globally.

Australian installations at Brisbane airport, Gold Coast's Jupiters Casino and Westfield Chermside in Brisbane's north would go live before year's end, while ones at Canberra airport and Westfield Carindale, also in Brisbane, would be online in the first quarter of next year.

Overseas installations were being built at Westfield Stratford in London, at the 2012 Olympic Village site, Westfield Garden State Plaza in New Jersey, and at 2 Macerich shopping malls. Mr Joffe said the system also had been rolled out at furniture chain Ikea's concept centre at Delft, in the Netherlands.

In 2010, the company also forged a \$US780,000 contract with the City of Seattle for an electronic parking guidance system. Mr Joffe said it is finished and operating.

"Typical; customer pays anything from \$1-2 million for a shopping centre installation," Mr Joffe said.

He cited security as a reason for airport car parks to adopt Park Assist.

"Security is a key issue at airports these days, and the opportunity to monitor each space with a camera can improve the security level of Australian airports," he said.

"A number of bombings have occurred at airport car parks in the past such as in Moscow in January 2011 and in Spain, Ireland and many others."

He said customers chose whether to develop add ons such as a parking app for their Park Assist installation. In paid settings, there was an option to guide parkers to a preferred store depending on what they were prepared to spend for parking.

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